

Serbian Church expels Montenegro govt officials and MPs



The Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro expelled government representatives and MPs who backed a controversial law on freedom of religion amid chaotic scenes in parliament.

The Episcopal Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro on Sunday expelled Montenegrin government representatives and MPs after the Freedom of Religion Law was passed despite unrest in parliament last week.

The church urged government officials to start a dialogue before the law becomes a source of serious social divisions with unprecedented consequences.

“Passing such a law does not serve to honour those who proposed it or those who voted for it. Those who are Orthodox have excommunicated themselves from the Orthodox Church, regrettably. We command the clergy not to do any ecclesiastical work for them until they repent,” the church said in a statement.

The law was passed on Friday despite fierce objections from the Serbian Orthodox Church, its supporters and pro-Serbian opposition parties who claim that the legislation will enable the authorities to steal the Serbian Orthodox Church's property in Montenegro.

While MPs in parliament debated the law, opposition supporters, Serbian Orthodox priests and members of the public took to the streets to express anger.

Trying to prevent the vote, MPs from the main opposition Democratic Front rushed at the speaker of parliament, some saying they were "ready to die" for the church.

Police then intervened and detained the MPs, after which parliament passed the law.

Police detained a total of 22 people over the incident, including all 18 Democratic Front deputies, 15 of whom were later released.

The controversial law includes a register of all religious buildings and sites that authorities say were owned by the independent kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia.

Under the law, religious communities will have to provide clear evidence of ownership in order to retain their properties, a provision that the Serbian Church says is designed to allow the government to strip it of its holdings.

Protests were held in Montenegro over the weekend because of the adoption of the law, and protesters also gathered in Banja Luka in Bosnia on Sunday.

Four police officers were injured while taking down a roadblock near Podgorica airport on Sunday, and police forces used tear gas the same evening to break up protests outside the Christ Resurrection Temple in Podgorica.

Police officials have warned that they will hold the organisers, including church officials, responsible for the incidents at the protests.

Church officials responded that they do not accept responsibility for the incidents and do not support any violence by the protesters.

Democratic Front MP Andrija Mandic on Saturday urged people to continue pressing the government and Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic to withdraw the law.

"Let all those who believe in God and belong to the Orthodox Church take to the

streets,” Mandic said.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that he is with the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, although he does not want to “interfere in the [country’s] internal affairs and spoil relations with Montenegro”, Tanjug news agency reported.

— Source: balkaninsight.com